

Will construction during spawning season hurt trout in Provo River?

Timing of canyon-wall work is assailed

11-25-97

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PROVO CANYON — Environmentalists say construction of a retaining wall next to the Provo River comes at a bad time for the trout population.

But the Utah Department of Transportation says the road work on U.S. 189 won't ruin the popular fishery.

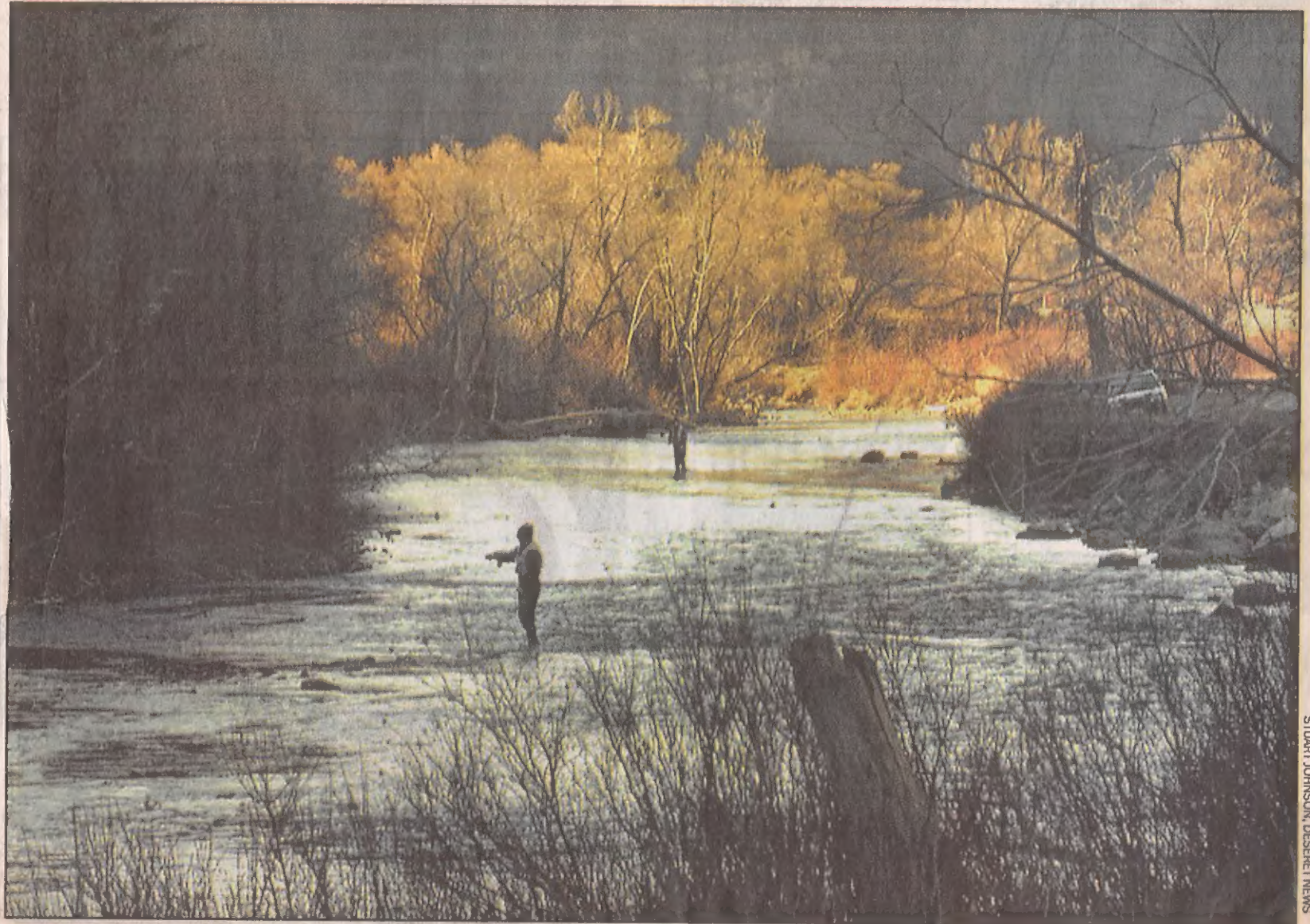
UDOT crews are laying sections of foundation for a 7,000-foot-long modular retaining wall between Upper Falls and the Sundance turnoff as part of the canyon road reconstruction project. The initial ground work coincides with the annual brown trout spawning period from mid-November to mid-December.

Environmental groups believe the work will dump sediment into the spawning grounds and ravage critical streamside vegetation. Sediment can kill trout eggs and lead to reductions in brown trout populations over time, they say.

"UDOT has shown a blatant disregard for the Provo River in this construction," said Steve Schmidt, owner of Western Rivers Flyfisher. "When this fishery declines, nothing can replace it."

Jeff Baird, UDOT Provo Canyon project manager, said claims that road crews are damaging the river are false.

"It's true we're going to be doing some things. But it's not true we're going to destroy the fishery," he said. The Provo River is among the top sport fishing



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Fly fishermen enjoy a warm November afternoon on the Provo River. The river is one of the top sport fishing streams in Utah and the West.

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UDOT previously assured critics that retaining wall construction would commence next spring to avoid affecting fish during the spawning season, said Zach Frankel, director of the Utah Rivers Council. The wall is part of a \$37 million project to widen a two-mile section of canyon road into a four-lane highway, including a pair of side-by-side tunnels.

Baird said construction crews decided to work on a few areas this winter while river flows are low. They're not laying the entire foundation and they're staying out of the water. Baird said the work meets environmental requirements and building specifications. UDOT also checked with the Army Corps of Engineers and the Division of Wildlife Resources before proceeding.

Charlie Thompson, regional aquatics manager, said Wildlife Resources had UDOT move one planned section of wall away from the river. The wall is not to support

the road, he said, and not to become a river bank.

"You're always concerned where construction goes. Things can happen so fast. It's such a tight canyon," he said.

Thompson said the division is "satisfied to this point" that wall construction won't adversely affect the river, which he said is currently in excellent health. Any problems it might have are not related to road construction, he said.

Frankel remains skeptical. "If the whole retaining wall fell into the river during high flows next spring, it really wouldn't surprise us," he said.

No one wants to see anything else fall in Provo Canyon. At least four major rock slides, including one that almost killed a motorist in March, have occurred along a 500-foot stretch above the Sundance turnoff the past year. The tumbling boulders forced UDOT to close the westbound travel lane for six months. It also put the construction project behind schedule.

There have been no rock slides this fall and the road remains open. Baird said crews still must clean up debris left by the slides.